

INVESTING IN THE FUTURE: POPULATION EDUCATION FOR YOUTH

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Contents

1. Introduction
 2. Today's Young People: Issues and Challenges
 - 2.1. Demographic Trends and Implications
 - 2.2. Choices, Rights, and Responsibilities
 3. Education, Population, and Development
 - 3.1. The ICPD Programme of Action on Youth Development and Education
 - 3.2. UNFPA's Role in Education
 4. Empowering Young People through Education and Participation
 - 4.1. Population Education
 - 4.2. Major Themes and Content Areas of Population Education
 - 4.3. Information and Communication Approaches
 - 4.4. Youth Participation
 5. Moving Beyond Cairo and into the next Century
 - 5.1. Improving Education on Sustainable Development Issues
 - 5.2. Strengthening Advocacy Efforts
 - 5.3. Enhancing Partnerships and Collaboration
 6. Increasing Investment in Young People
 7. Conclusion
- Acknowledgements
Glossary
Bibliography
Biographical Sketch

Summary

As the world celebrated the dawn of the new millennium, its population had already grown to 6 billion. This was an occasion to acknowledge human achievements and also to assess what the future may hold for the coming generations in the context of population projections, environmental challenges and the age-old, complex problem of poverty. The key to a peaceful and sustainable future is balancing population and resources, population growth and socio-economic development. The limitation of reproductive rights and choices are roadblocks to development; they perpetuate poverty. To achieve sustainable development there is a global need to equip people, especially the youth, with information and knowledge about life skills and to educate them about their reproductive health. Informed individuals safeguard their reproductive health and

make better, informed choices about their future, their family life, and their role in the development process.

Today's young people are more vulnerable than ever before to the pressures of a rapidly changing society. They experience an earlier onset of puberty and sexual activity, than previous generations, and they have little knowledge about the adverse consequences of risky behaviors. In many developing countries, girls are still marginalized compared to boys. Girls still face double standards and heavier risks of discrimination by the society than do their male peers. Consequences of girls' sexual behavior such as pregnancy, STDs, HIV/AIDs, abortion, abandonment, and social stigma, result in serious damage to their self-esteem, and health, which in turn reduces their opportunities for individual growth and development.

It is important to keep in mind that young people are not only victims, they are part of the solution and can be a key resource for making a difference in their lives. If sustainable development is to be more than a slogan, women and adolescent girls must also participate actively in all of its aspects, including educational and job opportunities. Women can play an important advocacy role in policy issues that directly affect their well being, and, with education, they can exercise greater control over their health and reproductive concerns. Basic education for all is an essential component of forward-looking social development programs.

Important changes are required to facilitate the potential contributions that young people can make to their societies. Social policies must create a favorable political and economic context for the productive participation of adolescents. Information, education, communication and reproductive health care systems all have a crucial role in improving adolescents' quality of life both now and throughout the stages of the lifecycle. This can come about through, *inter alia*, the promotion of gender equity, social participation, and health education, that will lead to better opportunities and improved quality of life for generations to come.

1. Introduction

In October of 1999, the world celebrated the arrival of its six billionth inhabitant. Like any new arrival, this one raises some serious questions about the future. How is the new baby to be fed and cared for? What about health care and education? Does it make a difference if the new arrival is a boy or a girl? What sort of life can this young child look forward to?

An important part of UNFPA's mission is to ask—and to help answer—such questions. To that end, the Fund helps educate young people, their parents, and societies at large about the many links between population and our future. UNFPA-assisted projects help spread the word about how rapid population growth can contribute to serious environmental problems like deforestation, for example, and can hinder a nation's ability to provide basic services for its citizens. Educational campaigns help people realize how a country struggling to keep pace with the needs of its burgeoning population may be hard-pressed to protect its environment or develop its resources in a sustainable way. And they explain how the impact is felt at the individual level; too, as

unplanned, unwanted pregnancies can negatively affect the health and welfare of mothers and their babies - as well as the future prospects of the entire family. PopEd and sex education are therefore a key part of UNFPA's work, as the Fund seeks to help equip people with the knowledge they need to plan their families, safeguard their reproductive health, and participate fully in the development process.

The Fund's educational mission is one of some urgency, because in the last 12 years, the world added a billion people. Ninety-six percent of the growth in human numbers is taking place in the developing world. Asia, Africa and Latin America now have 4.9 billion people, the population of the entire world in 1986. At the same time there is still hesitancy in many instances, to address the reproductive health needs of young couples, adolescent pregnancy remains a serious problem in many parts of the world, and AIDS and STDs remain in epidemic proportions. And there is an urgent need to develop an appropriate gender perspective in the workplace and in everyday interaction.

According to projections by the United Nations Population Division, world population will reach 8.9 billion in 2050. This is the medium-variant projection; the actual figure, of course, could be higher or lower. Action in the next decade will determine how quickly this milestone will be reached. Individual choices can slow down population growth, but decisive policies and accessible services are needed to ensure that these choices can be freely made. If countries do not support couples in their efforts to plan their families, then population growth will be faster and global problems will be multiplied.

During the past decade, a number of global conferences addressed the need for sustainable development aimed at improving the quality of life of the world's population. The so-called Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, stressed that meeting human needs must be the central focus of development. The summit, officially called the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), issued a Programme of Action called *Agenda 21*. Noting that unsustainable patterns of consumption and production are depleting natural resources, contributing to environmental degradation and reinforcing social inequities and poverty, the action plan called for a development approach that would break this cycle. Similar themes were discussed at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), which was held in Cairo.

The 20-year Programme of Action that emerged from the ICPD conference emphasizes the linkages between population and development and stresses the importance of focusing on the needs of individual men, women and children. In 1995, the Copenhagen Social Summit and the Fourth World Conference on Women (held in Beijing) took the consensus that was painstakingly stitched together at Cairo and wove it into the fabric of social development. In 1999, at a special session of the United Nations General Assembly called to review the progress made to date in implementing ICPD goals, the world community not only endorsed those goals once again, but also strengthened a number of them.

It's clear, then, that humanity has reached some agreement on how to respond to a world of 6 billion-plus inhabitants. There is, for example, broad recognition of the

global need for slower, more balanced population growth. Water supply, food security and environmental change all respond in one way or another to population growth and distribution. Experts may not agree on the precise relationships, but there is widespread agreement that slower population growth will make solutions easier.

Poverty, gender inequality, resource use and the environment are so closely linked that none can be effectively addressed apart from the others. The first priority is to meet the basic needs of ordinary people for food, water, shelter, sanitation, and services such as health-care and education. Reproductive health is widely accepted as a human right, on the same basis as the overall right to health. The need for gender equity and equality is also acknowledged, both to satisfy human rights concerns and to liberate the full potential of half of the world's population. Meeting these needs and safeguarding these rights will lay the basis for economic development that is both fair and sustainable.

Women are disproportionately found among the poorest of the poor. Eliminating social, cultural, political and economic discrimination against them is therefore an important step towards eradicating poverty and achieving sustainable development. Equally essential is reproductive health care, including family planning. Ensuring women's access to education, jobs, and the information and services they need to plan their families will allow them to participate fully in activities and decision-making at home and in their communities—including activities and decisions relating to population and the environment.

The global conferences of the last decade acknowledged women's roles as managers of agriculture and the local environment, as well as their crucial place in the informal sector of the economy. The conferences recognized that environmental degradation often has a direct impact on women's health and livelihoods, and that many development initiatives fail because they do not acknowledge the vital roles and rights of women, including young girls. The Beijing Platform for Action called on countries to ensure women's equal participation in society and equal access to economic resources, including land, credit, science and technology, training, information and markets. It is now widely acknowledged that women's participation in development is essential to protect the environment and to achieve sustainable development.

International discussions and national programs alike have given increasing attention to the needs of young people throughout the world. At 1.1 billion, today's generation of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 is the biggest ever. Some 890 million of these young people are in developing countries, and roughly 450 million, or more than half, are both out of school and out of work. More than a quarter of a million young people are infected with a sexually transmitted disease (STD) every day. They have special needs for health care and education, including sexual and reproductive health education, both to fulfill their individual potential and to make the maximum possible contribution to development. As this population group enters the preparatory stages of adulthood, society's role in addressing their educational and health needs is more critical than ever. Many developing countries stand to reap a "demographic bonus" if the millions of youth entering the workforce do so with the knowledge and freedom to contribute fully to economic and sustainable development. If these young people are ill prepared and poorly educated, this opportunity will be lost.

In most parts of the world, health and family planning programs have neglected adolescents. Young people are often presumed to be sexually inactive before entering marriage, and therefore have been denied access to services by laws or policies. However, a number of factors, including earlier physical maturity, urbanization, poverty, and exposure to various media, predispose adolescents to engage in premarital sexual activity. The unintended consequences of adolescents' sexual behavior (including pregnancy, STDs, abortion, truncated educations, and social stigma) can negatively affect their entire futures.

Many UNFPA initiatives therefore focus on educating young people about the choices available to them - including ones related to marriage and child-bearing; reproductive health and family planning; schooling and jobs; and development on the individual, national and global levels.

2. Today's Young People: Issues and Challenges

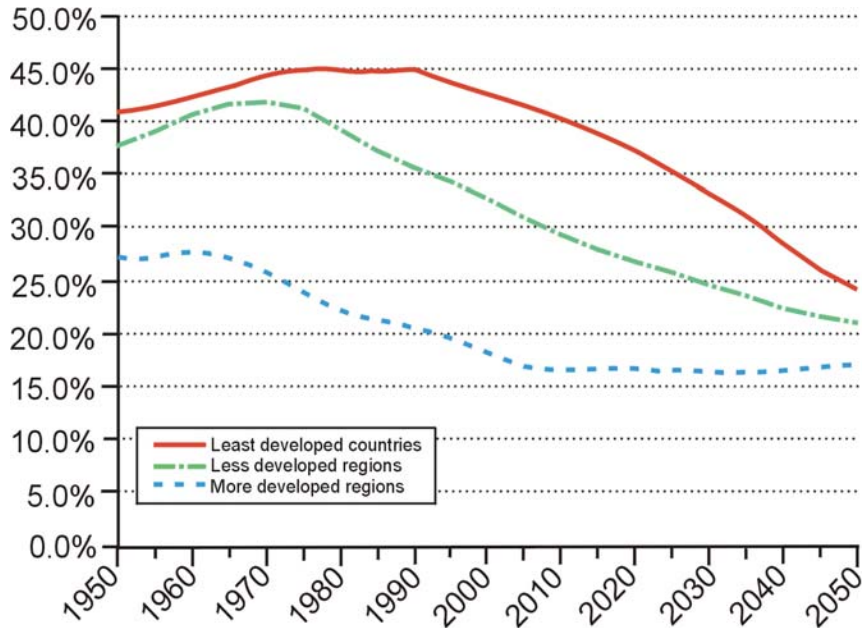
Young people, as defined by the United Nations, are 10 to 24 years old. "Youth" often refers to those aged 15 to 24, and "adolescents" to those between 10 and 19 years old. These terms, of course, have different meanings in various societies and may be used differently according to existing political, economic, and sociocultural contexts. Working in partnership with its member states and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), United Nations agencies respect varying definitions of young people. Regardless of the definitions, however, there is growing consensus about the need to address the problems and concerns of youth.

2.1. Demographic Trends and Implications

Overall, the developing regions of the world have seen impressive reductions in the occurrence of illness and premature death, along with advances in educational attainment and increased implementation of the right to reproductive choice. The result has been lower birth rates and slower population growth. These changes have been transforming the compositions of national populations.

However, the increase in the number of young people in the world is compounding the number of changes and challenges they face. In most cases, the populations of least-developed countries are still largely concentrated in the younger age brackets. Worldwide, there are 71 countries and territories in which more than 40 percent of the population is under the age of 15. Forty-four of these countries are in Africa, 12 in Asia, eight in the Arab States and seven in Latin America. In the more developed regions, the proportion of the population under age 15 peaked around 1960 - a decade earlier and at a lower level than in the less developed regions as a whole (Figure 1).

Globally, the largest share of adolescents (and other age groups) is and will continue to be in Asia, which has 60 percent of the world's population. But since 1980, over 50 percent of the increase in younger people has been in sub-Saharan Africa. Between 1960 and 1995, the number of adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa aged 10–19 increased by 80 to 200 million per decade. Though the pace is declining, increases will continue until at least 2015.



Source: United Nations. World Population Prospects: The 1996 Revision.

Figure 1. Proportion of population below age 15, 1950-2050.

In the less-developed regions, the proportion of people in the 15–24 age group reached 20.6 percent in 1985, its highest proportion ever. That figure reached 19.1 percent in 1995, and has been declining ever since. Because of the growing size of the total population, the proportion of young people will continue to decrease, reaching 14.1 percent in 2050. Actual numbers in this age group will be 1.16 billion in 2050, compared with 863 million in 1995 and 769 million in 1985.

Facts about Adolescents

- About 17 million girls between the ages of 15 and 19 give birth each year, accounting for more than 10 percent of births worldwide.
- Yearly, it is estimated that one in 20 adolescents contract STDs, which are often untreated; more than 50 percent of new HIV infections occur among 15- to 24-year-olds.
- It is estimated that as many as 4.4 million abortions are sought by adolescent girls each year;
- Most adolescents who have sexual relations do not use contraceptives or condoms to prevent pregnancy or STDs/HIV/AIDS; among sexually active young people, only 17 percent use contraceptives.

Recognition of adulthood comes not only with age, but also with actions centering on work and family. Mechanisms for preparing young people for adult responsibility are a defining feature of all societies. In the past, such mechanisms included a thorough grounding in social practices. The rapid pace of social change now increasingly

challenges these practices, which include socialization processes and such concepts as respect for older people and optimal ages for marriage.

Much of this change is positive, reflecting the liberating effect of development: for example, the increasing freedom of young people of both sexes, but particularly young women, reflects a partial relaxation of the imperative of early marriage and child-bearing. But the new generation of unmarried young women does not gain the respect—however delimited by deference to spouses and in-laws and expectations of early child-bearing—traditionally accorded to married women of their age. New norms of acceptable behavior are developing, but in the meantime young people are more vulnerable to the pressures of change. Girls and boys have different expectations about sexual relationships, coercion and seduction; girls still face double standards; and many males are still socialized to act in a sexually predatory manner towards unmarried women. The process of change in social norms has to be encouraged and special measures taken to enable young people of both sexes to take advantage of the new possibilities in a safe and responsible manner.

Young people's preparation for social participation and involvement in the development process is becoming longer and more complex, which can lead to new opportunities for them. But without proper preparation, guidance, and education, or if attitudes and behaviors do not adjust to the changing social circumstances, adolescence can instead be a time of lost potential, heightened health risks and even victimization. Young women continue to bear the heavier burden of discrimination and risk.

The right to reproductive health, including family planning, is the foundation for women's ability to exercise the rest of her rights as well. Policy makers need to be convinced that adolescents also have reproductive rights and that their reproductive health needs should be addressed. A significant difference still exists in the way boys and girls are treated in many societies. Girls enjoy far fewer rights than boys, particularly in the areas of education, nutrition and health care. And adolescent girls in many rural areas are even more disadvantaged than their urban counterparts.

How best to address the sexual and reproductive health needs of adolescents is a matter for discussion within the family, the community and the nation. It has often proved difficult to reconcile the important role of parents with the capacity of young people to make their own decisions as they grow towards adulthood, or to define the role of society in mediating what is primarily a family matter. Ignoring the issue, however, incurs a high cost in terms of ill health, wasted life opportunities and social disruption.

Education is important for everyone, but it has special significance for girls. It empowers them in multiple ways. Girls who have been educated are likely to marry later, for example, and to have smaller, healthier families. Educated women can recognize the importance of health care and know how to seek it for themselves and their children. Education helps girls to know their rights and to gain the confidence to claim them. However, while the importance of programs for adolescent girls is clear, it is equally evident that there is also a need to address the concerns of young men. There is a knowledge gap in terms of understanding, and dealing with, men's and young boys' attitudes about violence towards women, and in finding ways to prevent such violence.

Research is needed to better understand boys' perceptions of their roles, as they become adults and parents. Moreover, there should be better socialization programs for both boys and girls so they become more responsible adults, parents and citizens.

To build a consensus on these issues, countries must involve not only government services, but also parents, women's and youth groups and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Some of these issues are quite sensitive in many societies. Thus, it is important to improve communication between adults and young people, particularly among parents and their children, and to identify positive role models in society.

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Biographical Sketch

Dr (Mrs) Nafis Sadik is the Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund and holds the rank of Under Secretary-General. On her appointment in 1987, she became the first woman to head one of the United Nation's major voluntarily funded programmes. As chief executive of UNFPA, the world's largest source of multilateral assistance to population programs, Dr Sadik directs a worldwide staff of about 800. UNFPA provides assistance to over 140 countries and territories throughout the world. A national of Pakistan, Dr.Sadik was born in Jaunpur, India. She received her doctor of medicine degree from Dow Medical College (Karachi) and served her internship in gynaecology and obstetrics at City Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, USA. Dr Sadik completed her further studies at The Johns Hopkins University (USA). Dr Sadik was the first female recipient of the Hugh Moore Award in 1976, named after a pioneer in the United States credited with calling attention to the world population crisis. She was cited for her leadership in the family planning field as well as for her leadership in encouraging other women to find careers in the population field. Dr Sadik is a recipient of several honorary degrees (The John Hopkins University, Brown University, Duke University, Tulane University, University of Michigan, University of the Philippines, Japan Nihon University, among others.) She has written numerous articles for leading publications and edited several books in the family planning, health and population and development fields. Dr Sadik is married to Azhar Sadik, a businessman, has three children and three adopted children.